

Extremes Meet: Anglo-Polish Perspective on Sexual Politics

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POLES AND BRITS APART

The Anglo-Polish perspective on sexual politics gives us an opportunity to analyze the status of LGBT rights as civil rights from the opposite poles within the European Union struggling for democracy.

Let us use a pictorial metaphor of comparing the US and the EU in terms of sexual politics. There is a post-G. W. Bush division into the red (conservative) states and blue (liberal) states of the US. The UK is a blue blue state in the EU (except for its joining the Iraq invasion), Poland is red red one in relation to LGBT rights (and joining the Iraq invasion). Because of the proclaimed independence of particular EU countries when it comes to the so-called moral issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion, there seems to be nothing that can be done to change the legal backgrounds of the social injustice and the differences between the two states.

From the Polish perspective, with the implementation of the Same-Sex Civil Partnerships in Britain in 2005 and further developments, including the mainstreaming of queer issues and identities in popular and intellectual culture, the total success of LGBT rights has been achieved. And as her Majesty the Queen had it, it is a basic matter of social justice.

Of course, we presume that from the British perspective there is still a great deal that has to be done to change the social prejudices especially, as we hear, in Northern Ireland, and to deal with local emerging far-right parties (the British National Party). There is also the open question of the proper marriage instead of Civil Partnership.

But the basic social justice have been achieved, a far cry from Poland.

THE UK AND POLAND DIDN'T SIGN THE EUROPEAN CHARTER OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Yet there are some paradoxical similarities between Poland and the UK. First of all, both countries refused to sign the European Charter of Fundamental Rights in 2007. In both cases it was a rejection of unions. Poland was afraid that the Charter would impose same-sex

unions on the country. Britain rejected it for fear of trade unions. The two countries had opt-outs to the Lisbon Treaty because of the Declaration of Fundamental Rights.

POLES IN POLAND AND BRITAIN

Secondly, thousands of Poles live in both countries. And this is the most significant link that might have an influence on the sexual politics in Poland and Britain. Poles coming to Britain and living there have to learn to accept the conditions of multisexual societies (and there are even special courses organized for them to restrict traditional Polish intolerance!). So there is a hope that coming back to Poland some day they would bring some more enlightened perspective on LGBT rights and minority cultures. What is more, Polish couples that enter the same-sex partnership in Great Britain would have a stronger argument to demand recognition in Poland and in this way influence Polish legislation and the media. In fact, we can already note a media discussion (TV, newspapers) about gay and lesbian couples with "British partnership" who are coming to Poland and calling for the recognition of their same-sex unions.

Despite the similarities, there is a great divide in sexual politics from the Anglo-Polish perspective.

The last decade in British politics has been a success of Gay and Lesbian rights as civil and human rights. And this is maybe the positive outcome of the Tony Blair policy.

In striking opposition to it, the recent history of Polish sexual politics is very sombre, Gothic, pessimistic - certainly not like the Queen and her idea of social justice.

THE FAILURE OF PROGRESSIVE GENDER AND QUEER POLITICS IN POLAND?

We would like to focus now on the failure of progressive gender and queer politics in Poland.

In 2009 we are celebrating in Poland the 20th anniversary of freedom, independence and democratic development - since 1989 when communism collapsed. Unfortunately from the sexual politics point of view, it is a history of doom. Yet it is a strange kind of failure, full of tiny victories.

Obviously, on the one hand, the story of feminism, and gay and lesbian movement in Poland has been a success. Since 1989 we have achieved the introduction of progressive gender consciousness and agenda in the liberal media, in the arts, in the

academia and on the streets with the spectacular civil rights demonstrations which won legality. Another aspect of the positive developments are the strong and supportive collaborations between feminist and queer culture, politics and activism, working together towards fostering social justice and fighting discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation.

But, remembering and underlining all the achievements, we have to reach a dark and pessimistic point and change the tone. At this very moment, in 2009, twenty years after the transition, and five years after the joining of the EU, the progressive gender and queer politics in Poland is a big failure. From the gender perspective, the country looks more like a theocracy than a democracy. It definitely does not comply with the EU anti-discriminatory agenda.

To prove this, we only need to look at the hard legal facts that affect our lives on the basic level.

First, the restrictive and cruel anti-abortion law and practice introduced in 1993 is still in power and intact, and the prospect seems to be darker and darker, dragging us into more and more fundamentalist reproductive policy. We are referring here to the recent discussions concerning the in vitro and genetic testing regulations. The situation looks very grim and out of the EU context of

human rights; yet there seems to be nothing that can be done right now to change the situation and stop the discrimination against women's right to choose for themselves.

Second, there is no provision in the Polish law that grants any kind of recognition and protection for same-sex couples. Poland is one of the few EU countries lacking this type of acknowledgement. The only protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation exists in the employment law and was introduced because Poland had to accept the Employment Directive to enter the EU. The politicians were basically forced to sign in, and since then no anti-discrimination policy on the basis of gender or sexuality has come out of the "independent" Polish government, not being pressured by Brussels. The Polish government has not signed the Charter of Fundamental Rights because of the danger of gay rights.

To sum up, we can, we do and we should march on the street, speak on the media, teach at universities, create culture, enjoy the clubs, have conferences ... but we still live in a society where we have no basic civil rights. This is a very peculiar dualism that we live with at this very moment that makes us diagnose the transition as failure. There is no real victory!

We learned to accept this unjust consensus and pretend that our

culture is liberal and open since the gender and sexuality discourse is strong and present, even though the political and legal solutions drastically lag behind and place Poland and us on the margins of the European civilization of human rights.

And, of course, there are always more urgent issues to attend to, e.g., the current economic crisis.

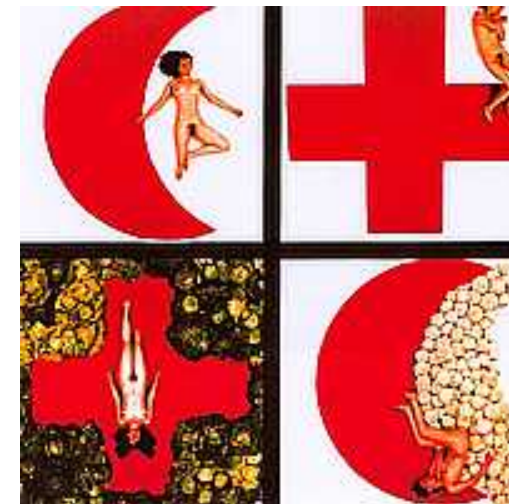
We used to think about feminist and queer art as fostering democracy and civil rights in Poland. Especially that the feminist and queer culture is paradoxically very strong in Poland; e.g. gay literature and art is blooming. Here, for instance, our exhibition *Love and Democracy* showed gay (Karol Radziszewski) and lesbian (Justyna Apolinarzak) visual culture (Poznań 2005, Gdańsk 2006). Also, the current Gdańsk exhibition *Vogue*, curated by Paweł Leszkowicz, foregrounds gay artists.

But today we would like to change the perspective and place art as a dark prophet, an indicator of the failure of progressive gender politics here. And a witness to this peculiar duality and hypocrisy of the open/closed society and the culture that we have to live with.

ART FOR GAY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS - AND ITS CENSORSHIP IN POLAND

We would like to remind you again of the two very well-known cases of public art/campaigns for women's and gay and lesbian rights that were censored. It happened in the past, yet it still defines our present and future.

(1) Katarzyna Kozyra, *Blood Ties*, 1999



In 1999, Katarzyna Kozyra's photo-piece *Blood Ties* (Więzy krwi) was to be exhibited as public art on (city) billboards as part of the Outdoor Gallery project by the Art Marketing Syndicate, a company which owns billboards. "Blood Ties" comprises four square photographs. Each of the panels features a naked woman - the artist

herself and her disabled sister (with an amputated leg) - on the backdrop of a red cross or a crescent, surrounded in the two bottom panels by cabbages and cauliflowers. Only the two more colourful panels were to be exhibited on billboards. The intention of both the artist and the AMS was to bring into focus women's suffering inflicted by the clashing religions and nationalisms in the Kosovo war, hence the use of the cross and the crescent, symbols of Christianity and Islam and the emblems of the two major charities, the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, founded to bring relief to war casualties. The women themselves are posed to appear as casualties, connoting surrender/yielding/fear/vulnerability/hurting, an impression underscored by the non-commercial realistic nudity of the female body and the disability of one of the sisters.



This deeply humanistic and aesthetic image became nonetheless

a cause for indignation and subject to censoring, and [the] women as subjects of and subject to suffering were deemed intruders on Polish streets. Not until the journalists of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and other periodicals got wind of what was about to be put up on the streets of cities did they commence inquiring Catholic organisations and municipal administration whether they would dissent. Both the clergy and the lay authorities answered to this media call to arms, the call for strong-arm tactics. Due to a flood of epistolary pleas and demands, the AMS - the firm till then keen on the promotion of the public art - turned tail and opted for the (over)protection of its private business. With the artist's consent, the work was expurgated: the nude women were blue-pencilled in such a way that the cross and the crescent became indecipherable. The poster was bowdlerized; subsequently the message got lost.



The reason for the acute censorship was the allegedly unholy usage of religious symbols, as supposedly the naked female body was to profane both the cross and the crescent; it was a blasphemy against Christianity as well as Islam. Contrary to the artist's original intention, the work was (mis)interpreted as women being the menace to, and not the victims of, politico-religious ideologies.

2) Karolina Breguła / KPH - Let them see us, 2003



In 2003 in Poland, a year before the country joined the EU, an NGO, Campaign against Homophobia, organized a public campaign entitled "Let them see us". The woman artist, Karolina Breguła, took photographs of thirty real gay and lesbian couples in love holding hands and standing on Polish streets. The images were displayed on billboards as public art and in the galleries. In the streets the

portraits were immediately destroyed by far-right groups, but the touring exhibition in the galleries was a huge popular success. The campaign ignited an open and influential discussion about gay and lesbian rights as human rights and brought out not only the same-sex couples but also the subject from the realm of taboo and invisibility. We were one of the couples in the campaign and described our experiences in a text "Let Us Be Seen" in *Men Speak Out. Views on Gender, Sex, and Power*, Shira Tarrant (ed), Routledge 2008.

The artistic examples are from the past, but this is still the past that defines our present. It is alive.

It is also another kind of feminist/queer collaboration in marginalisation and censoring in the public space.

The destruction of the billboards was the benchmark example of reducing the public debate on the rights of women and gays and lesbians. It was also an example of this paradoxical dualism - you can have the discourse but not the real lasting change - no permanent presence testified by the democratic law. Like the posters, they were displayed only for a moment, and then destroyed or removed. It was a momentary performance of human rights through art, but not the proper implementation of the rights (legal recognition). So the transitory story of the posters in the public sphere symbolizes the

duality of open/closed society and a democracy that gives only the temporary illusion of rights.

With the two cases of progressive public art, it all happened exactly the same way the public debate over the liberalization of the anti-abortion law and regulations of same-sex unions is being marginalized and put off by the Polish politics or ruling politicians.

We owe them the failure!!! The ruling politicians. The right wing has been in power in Poland since 2005 and it looks like it would be ruling for the next decade.

But we don't want to speak about the Polish politics again, the power of the ruling rights and the weakness, falsity and disintegration of the Left. We have been there many times.

We would like to pose another question: maybe we owe the failure - to some extent - also to ourselves.

We have not done enough. We wallow in the substitute of publishing, marching and visualizing that have been granted to us in a semi-democratic state. To keep us in a frustrating state of coolness and releasing the tension. Small steps and culture are very important but they are not enough. There is still a transgression that

we have not done.

We have still failed to take the real power to rule the country. And until we do this, the anti-abortion law, the situation of same-sex unions and many other social issues would not change.

GAY CULTURE BETWEEN COMMODIFICATION AND REVOLT. HOW TO ACT POLITICALLY?

And at this point from the Polish perspective we deal with a GenderQueerUtopia that so far has been impossible to turn into reality. But, from the international European perspective, we know that the Utopia has been realized in many countries, including the UK, and is no longer a project but a practice of democracy and civil rights for all members of the society, with the rights for women to choose and the rights of gays and lesbians to live freely, safely and creatively. That is why, we would suggest that in the framework of a utopian approach to transnational politics, we in Poland should learn from more civilized and humane countries how to make the Utopia a reality and apply it legally and socially. To combine the cosmopolitan inspiration and pressure with the grassroots action.

And Great Britain is definitely one of the main countries to learn from, especially regarding the shared masses of Polish citizens.

But from the Anglo-Polish perspective is there something that can be learnt the other way around? The British from the Poles?

Yes, it might be the constant subversive power of LGBT activism and culture/art.

In a country like Poland which still hinges between democracy and fundamentalism, the fragile and difficult problem of sexual difference, queer sexual politics, offers for the society and culture the margin for the subversive edge and revolutionary force. It is precisely the transforming energy which in Eastern Europe (not only in Poland!) is still contained in the queer question that makes the subject here so different from its Western incarnation. The commercial commodification has not happened fully yet, and then the political and social implications are still revolutionary, but difficult. One might even propose the idea of a sexual avant-garde to define gay and lesbian expression in the culture and society, as we did in our Polish-language book *Love and Democracy . Reflections on the Homosexual Question in Poland* (2005). And redefine the new left politics that could reinvigorate itself through gender and queer progressive policy.

In the recent issues of a popular British gay magazine *The Attitude* the authors ask a jaded and ironic question what we can still fight for

after the same-sex civil partnership and the muscle boys culture have spread everywhere.

The only good thing about Poland is that you can NOT ask question like this here. There is still something very radical, revolutionary and uncanny, *unheimlich* in queer sexual politics. And there is still plenty to fight for, including even the eye candy trivia of the muscle boys.

And to our colleagues from *The Attitude* we might say ironically, but not jadedly, fight for Poland ... and the rest of the world.

MANCUNIAN DIAGNOSIS - GLOBAL CHANGE TO FOLLOW

While in Manchester, it is only fitting to recall a Mancunian thinker, Engels, and paraphrase him: there is a historical need to diagnose the Condition of the Queer Classes in England and Poland - and globally (cf. Engels , *The Condition of the Working Classes in England / Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*, 1845). From a different work by Engels and Marx (*The Communist Manifesto / Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, 1848) allow us to use and abuse the beginning: A spectre is haunting the planet - the spectre of queerness. All the powers of the old world have entered into an unholy alliance to exorcise the spectre: Pope and Czar; Benedict and Luzhkov; Turkey, Iran, Egypt and India; Lithuania's parliament

and Poland's twins; the British National Party and All-Polish Youth now in a charge of the Poland's Public Television - both organizations anti-Semitic and anti-queer.

The fall of Communism (which, in fact, had never arrived in Poland) exactly twenty years ago is now followed by a crisis, a fall of capitalism. The crisis can be creative. A new social justice arrangement may include legal protection of LGBT throughout the EU, and in the candidate countries (Turkey), as well as globally. This is a time for reflection and change. Exclusions of the refugees, of the poor, of women, of LGBT should stop.

With fifty countries where homosexuality is illegal (including India and its anti-LGBT law as part of the heritage of the British law plus the local homophobia), with queers fearing for their lives in some of them, with far-right homophobia in the UK and Poland, it is time for us to progress in queer rights in our countries - and worldwide.

A CALL FOR HOSPITALITY TO OTHERNESS

How can we promulgate LGBT rights, democracy and pluralism of subjectivities? Hospitality could be the intellectual and political principle as the human value of accepting and hosting Others. Hospitality is advocated from the ancient epics of many cultures, the

Bible, the Koran, Homer through Immanuel Kant to Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous; the latter authored a theatre play on hospitality in the legendary Theatre du Soleil's spectacle Odysees about refugees.

Inspired by the Hebrew Bible, Levinas' and Derrida's is an attempt to construct a place of meeting, thinking and sheltering otherness in the idea of the cosmopolitan open city (ville franche) or the refuge city (ville refuge). All refugees and citizens; women and men; the homeless, jobless and migrant workers; LGBTQI and straight should form a planetary open city, a polis of equal rights. In many publications we have elaborated on this idea, emphasizing the telling pun in Polish: gość-inność, hospitality to otherness. The idea and praxis of hospitality is of prime importance as a principle against homophobia and for the full recognition of our rights.

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